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ABSTRACT

This brief introduction to the career of elementary level special education resource teacher first describes the nature of the work and the variety of settings in which these educators work. The pamphlet explains the education required, desirable personal qualities, the job outlook and possibilities for advancement, and some ways for high school students to explore such a career. A practitioner profile describes the work and attitudes of one such special educator. Four organizational resources are listed. (DB)

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CAREERS IN SPECIAL EDUCATION

# Special Education Resource Teacher

## ELEMENTARY LEVEL

Johnny solves 6th-grade math problems in his head but has trouble reading his 3rd-grade social studies book. Sally plays second viola in the 5th-grade orchestra yet can't recall her multiplication tables. Patty is a good sprinter yet can't attend to her school work for long periods of time. These three elementary children all have disabilities that present barriers to their education. The teachers who help them overcome these barriers are called special education resource teachers. The title may vary from state to state. Some are called consulting teachers, learning disabilities teachers, or teachers of children with mild disabilities. These teachers all have common jobs: They all work with students with mild disabilities for part of the school day. Children with mild disabilities include those with learning disabilities, behavioral disorders, and mental retardation.

### Nature of Work

The duties of a special education resource teacher at the elementary school level can be quite challenging. Like other elementary school teachers, the resource teacher is interested in the development and growth of the child. But the resource teacher's particular function for students with disabilities is to specially design instruction so the child can achieve the expected educational outcomes. The special education resource teacher designs instruction so that the child can learn by developing his or her abilities. The resource teacher discovers how a particular child learns best and individualizes instruction for that student.

For example, a resource teacher would use specialized reading techniques and materials to help Johnny raise his reading ability so that he could profit from instruction at his grade placement. In addition, the teacher would arrange for Johnny to learn the social studies materials and other curricula by reading aloud with another student or having a paraprofessional read to him so that he could learn despite his reading problems. To help Sally learn her multiplication tables, the resource teacher might use special strategies such as finger calculation. Patty might be placed on a behavior management program designed to increase her attention span so that she could complete her classroom assignments.

### Variety of Settings

Special education resource teachers teach in a variety of settings. They may work with students individually or in small groups in a special classroom, often called a Resource Room. Here students come for a block of time each day for their lessons and then return to their general education classroom.

Resource teachers may also team-teach with other teachers in their classrooms. In this setting, they assist general education teachers to make modifications in the meth-

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ods and materials they use. Instructional modifications are made for individual students or are incorporated into instruction for the entire class. Whether the special education resource teacher works with the children individually, or in small groups, or co-teaches, an important part of the job is communication.

Special education resource teachers work closely with parents. Together they plan the special education services to be provided to the student in a formalized process called an individualized education program (IEP). The IEP guides the resource teacher in planning lessons and providing appropriate instruction for the child. The parent and teacher meet frequently to discuss the child's progress, share information, and identify how the parents can best work with their child at home.

**The resource teacher discovers how a particular child learns best and individualizes instruction for that student.**

Special education resource teachers frequently collaborate with other professionals in the school. They work closely with regular classroom teachers, school psychologists, occupational and physical therapists, speech pathologists, and social workers.

## Education Required

Requirements for a special education teaching license vary from state to state. While a bachelor's degree is required, some states require a master's degree.

Many colleges and universities offer programs that prepare an individual to become a special education resource teacher. Teacher training programs often lead to certification to teach students with one type of disability (e.g., learning disabilities, mental retardation, behavior disorders). Some programs lead to multiple certification (e.g., mild disabilities).

Required course work generally includes an overview of the various disabilities, laws regarding special education, assessment and testing strategies, specialized curriculum and instruction, and behavior management techniques. Field practica (mini-teaching experiences) and student teaching are also required.

## Personal Qualities

Resource teachers need to have a sincere interest in teaching children who are hard-to-teach. This requires a creative, inventive mind and a willingness to try new ideas. The most important trait of a special education resource teacher is a dedication to help students reach their potential. Such teachers see the worth in each and every child.

Special education resource teachers must be able to work well with others. They must be able to collaborate with other professionals and parents.

## Job Outlook and Advancement

Because of the federal law requiring that public education be provided to students with disabilities, the demand for special education resource teachers is high. It is predicted this will continue for the forseeable future. In fact, in several states, special education is considered a critical need area for teachers. Hispanic, African American, and Asian resource teachers and resource teachers with disabilities are in particularly short supply.

Salaries for special education resource teachers range widely depending on the state and locale. Teacher salaries have risen significantly in the past several years, and most salaries are competitive with other professional entry level positions.

Resource teachers may advance to supervisory or administrative positions in schools or government agencies. With further education they can become researchers or teacher educators in colleges preparing other special educators. Other options include self-employment as private tutors or assessment specialists.

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# PRACTITIONER PROFILE

## Corina Coronel
### Special Education Resource Teacher/Elementary Level
### Arlington County Public Schools, Arlington, Virginia

Corina Coronel is a special education resource teacher in a public elementary school in Arlington, Virginia. In her 5 years of teaching, she has taught students with learning disabilities, students with emotional and behavioral problems, and bilingual students.

She grew up in Venezuela with Spanish as her native language. Her interest in special education began in high school when she tutored culturally disadvantaged youth as part of a community service requirement for graduation. She found out that a lot of the students she worked with actually had learning problems or emotional difficulties that kept them from being successful in school. She enjoyed figuring out ways to overcome these learning problems.

When her family moved to the United States, she decided to pursue special education as a career. She completed a bachelor's degree with a double major in early childhood and elementary education and a minor in special education. Later she returned for a master's in learning disabilities.

Most special education resource teachers teach specific skills to three to five students at a time in their own resource rooms and spend some time co-teaching or consulting with classroom teachers. Corina, on the other hand, is currently working in a unique setting: a multigraded classroom with a team of three other teachers and two educational assistants. They have 75 students from kindergarten through 5th grade. Ten students have disabilities. The class does many activities together as a whole group but divides into smaller groups for specific skill building activities.

A typical day starts with the whole group discussing the day's schedule, singing songs, and practicing a quick phonics exercise. Then the class breaks into smaller groups for writing, reading, and math. Students are grouped by ability. For example a third grader reading on a 5th-grade level would be with other students who read at the 5th-grade level.

Group projects emphasize cooperative learning activities where each student's participation is vital. Each child is assigned a task that contributes to completing the activity. For example, for a science experiment on weights, one student would be in charge of weighing the object, another would be responsible for recording the results, another would check the results, and so on.

During the block of time when the students go to "specials" (physical education, music, and art), the six teachers are free to plan lessons as a team.

Corina enjoys working with her team. Says Corina, "It's quite a diverse group, made up of professionals with different specialties. As the special educator of the team, I bring knowledge of assessment and alternate teaching techniques to the group. I also watch out for students who are falling behind, those identified as having disabilities as well as those who aren't identified."

"Because I am an Hispanic and a bilingual special educator, I am also able to work with students and their parents whose native language is Spanish. I can differentiate between 'true' learning difficulties and language or cultural difficulties."

"I really enjoy special education as a career. I've had a lot of different experiences and taught a variety of subjects. This diversity makes special education an attractive profession for me. It keeps me interested. Every day is different. I'm never bored."

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## How to Prepare for a Career

High school students should enroll in a college preparation program and take a variety of electives to get a broad based education. Once in a college or university, the special education major needs to work with the department advisor to know the course requirements for certification.

It's a good idea to gain some experience with students with disabilities before choosing special education as a career. Observing in a special education class and tutoring a child with a disability or assisting a special education resource teacher may provide the high school student with insight into the nature of the profession. Community programs serving children with disabilities, such as Special Olympics, Best Buddies, and Very Special Arts, can provide valuable volunteer experiences.

Employment in summer camps for children with disabilities or baby-sitting with neighborhood children with disabilities can also provide profitable experiences. Some high schools have clubs for students interested in becoming special education teachers. The Council for Exceptional Children can provide a list of these or can help establish a club at a high school.

## Resource Information

The Council for Exceptional Children
1920 Association Drive
Reston, VA 22091-1589

The National Clearinghouse for
Professions in Special Education
1920 Association Drive
Reston, VA 22091-1589

Learning Disabilities Association
4156 Library Road
Pittsburgh, PA 15234

Children with Attention Deficit Disorders
499 NW 70th Avenue, Suite 308
Plantation, FL 33317

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